

CPYRGHT

*Herald Tribune reporter Tom Wolfe first met Hugh Troy when he interviewed him in Washington in 1961. He saw Troy many times after that and, like all the man's friends, always marveled at his uniquely inventive mind. Troy's death Wednesday in Washington at the age of 58 ended the most fabulous—and profoundly satirical—career of practical jokery in American history. The following is a memoir by Tom Wolfe.*

# The Greatest Prankster's Exploits

Hugh Troy was a huge man, six-feet-five and 225 pounds. He was a mural painter who painted in bold images and no one, nobody, ever had to puzzle over. He wrote children's books with story lines which a child could understand which, in an age of arty children's books, is saying something. And yet when Hugh Troy truly wanted to get something off his chest, he invariably chose the most devious and the form of expression called the practical joke.

H. Allen Smith devoted an entire chapter to Troy in his book "The Compleat Practical Joker" and entitles it "At Work" Troy's practical jokes were, in fact, a genius. They always came to him in inspirations, practical visions, and at their best they were social satire of a rather high order.

"One thing people never understand," Troy once told me, "is that you can't just sit down and say, well, now, I'm going to think up a very funny practical joke. These kind always fall flat. It has to just come to you out of some situation. You're thinking about something and suddenly this idea just forms in your mind."

They welled up in Troy's mind right up to the end of his life. In 1952, for example, Troy, like a lot of people, was getting fed up with what was then America's latest fad, ghost writing. American University in Washington had gone so far as to establish a course in it. Dignitaries no longer even thought of writing their own speeches. The new president of a leading university had been caught delivering an inaugu-

ral address lifted—by his lazy ghost writer—from an article in an educational journal by another university president.

One night it just came to Troy: Ghost Artists, Inc. He placed an ad in the Washington Post & Times Herald of Feb. 5, 1952: "Too busy to paint? Have the talent but not the time? Call on The Ghost Artists, 1426 33d St. N. W. K. Phone Michigan 2574. We Paint It—You Sign It! Any Style! Impressionist, Modern, Cubist, Primitive (Grandma Moses), Abstract, Sculpture . . . also, Why Not Give an Exhibition?"

Immediately orders began pouring in, which Troy turned down, saying the firm was swamped with work. Then the newspaper and wire service reporters started calling up. For a big man with such a Pantagruelian imagination, Troy had a quiet, charming, gentle, in fact, rather genteel manner. In the most sincere and confidential tones he told each reporter that he would break down and tell the whole story if they would only please not use his name.

The next day the story was going out all over the country: of how this ring of ghost artists had been operating for three years in New York and was now opening a branch in Washington. In many orders from both in government circles after he bubbled up in Troy's brain. He told how he was having labor troubles with his New York outfit. It was hard to find good cubists any more. Also, several of his clients, he said, had become famous artists and the Ghost Artists



Drawing by TOM WOLFE  
Artist Hugh Troy

who had done the painting for them were getting irritable because they had to remain anonymous.

Inside of a week Troy's hoax was exposed. Then followed all that he had been waiting for, a round of editorials that seized the occasion to denounce the soft American underbelly of corruption in which ghost writing had been born.

Publishers were forever after Troy to write his autobiography but he always refused. I had the feeling that, in a way, Hugh Troy never wanted to explore the core of his feelings which inspired his bizarre performances he had for the world.

After the war Troy all but gave up art and writing to work for the Central Intelligence Agency. Yet even there Troy could not give up Troyism. There, like everywhere else in American life, bureaucracy was hanging fat on the branch, too ripe.

In the 1940s, during the war, Troy had achieved Army immortality with the Daily Flypaper Reports. He was out in the Pacific on a hot island and, like everybody else, getting tired of the endless paperwork. So Troy mimeographed forms for Daily Flypaper Reports, on which were detailed the number of flies trapped on each strand of flypaper in the mess hall plus complete data concerning the wind velocity, proximity to kitchen and window openings of each strand. He slipped the Flypaper Reports in among sheaves of regulation ones and sent them to headquarters. Soon other units of the command began to catch hell for not sending in theirs and the Daily Flypaper Reports became standard procedure throughout the Pacific Theater.

Troy took his CIA career quite seriously, however, but one day, he told me, somebody in the CIA handed down an order saying that any CIA employee who had a conversation with any representative of the news media

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had to report it in full, in writing, the next morning, no matter how unimportant it might have seemed. It got to be a bother. Troy lived next door to a newspaper publisher in Georgetown and three or four times a week he would have to come to work in the morning and start off writing one of these memos.

So he started writing memos that read like this:

"7 p.m. Was having dinner with my wife when interrupted by low rap on front door. Investigated. Opened door and at first saw no one. Then looked down and saw Leroy, last name not available, a representative of the Washington Post & Times Herald. Conversation ran as follows:

"Hello, Leroy, how are you?"

CPYRGHT "I is me, Mr. Troy, how you?"

"Fine, Leroy, what's the bad news?"

"Same old bad news, Mr. Troy, I's come for the money."

"How much I owe you, Leroy?"

"Two weeks, Mr. Troy."

"Here you are, Leroy."

"Thank you, Mr. Troy."

"Conversation terminated. Subject Leroy disappeared down side street."

But Troy was convinced, or always liked to believe, that his conversations with Leroy were what finally got the CIA to rescind the order. He never would let that story be published while he was alive. But with his death, people all over the world who have known Hugh Troy will be filling out the canon of his bizarre handiwork.

12 July 1964